

# LAUGHTER IS BOURGEOIS

*The Roots of Political Correctness*

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The Vancouver New Left had gathered and were in the midst of an intense discussion. The Maoist rhetoric flowed thick and fast and several Yippies started giggling uncontrollably. A young woman berated the long-hairs declaring that "Laughter is bourgeois!"

## THE ROOTS OF POLITICAL CORRECTNESS

Political Correctness was around for many years before the mass media caught on. It is definitely not an invention of the late 1980's as many people seem to think. I recall hearing the term almost 25 years ago, used to describe the very sort of priggishness and authoritarianism encountered in the young woman who thought it bourgeois to laugh. Political correctness was an insulting term to most of us. But early-format PC did harm the movement. There were certain things you would not dare to speak or write about. Our real opinions could only be aired among our closest friends, for if it came out that you thought Mao a mass murderer, the Black Panther Party a bunch of gangsters or that certain fringe feminists were female fascists, you would find yourself attacked as "reactionary", "racist" and "sexist". And there was no place in the leftist counter-culture for anyone having to live under the burden of those epithets.

Political correctness wasn't just one of those regrettable spin-offs from the New Left like terrorism or neostalinism. The roots of the affliction go back much further, through Stalinism and Leninism and beyond to the 19th Century workers' movement.

## AUTHORITARIANISM IN THE WORKERS' MOVEMENT

Two aspects of the workers' movement reflected the dominant culture and helped give rise to PC. From science came the now discredited concept of Positivism - the idea that nature and society could be understood through the discovery of so-called absolute laws. Positivism applied to politics gave the illusion that a very narrowly defined course of action, later to become known as the "political line" could be worked out in advance by theoreticians. The political line was "correct" and those who disagreed were deemed ignorant or obtuse. From a kind of mis-guided Christianity came notions of sin, guilt, and black and white moralism. One's opponents were not merely wrong, but also wicked, and every issue could be sharply defined in the most simple-minded Manichian fashion -progressives vs. reactionaries, proletarians vs. bourgeois, evolutionism vs. revolution etc., Secularized Fundamentalist moralism fostered sectarianism and intolerant attitudes within the workers' movement.

Nonetheless, the democratic attitude prevailed. Edouard Bernstein was denounced as a "revisionist" (note carefully the religious terminology) but remained within the Social Democratic Party. Even his most vociferous critics would never have thought of silencing or expelling him. The conflicts within the anarchist movement are an even better example of this tolerance.

concept of racism. It isn't just ignorance that has given rise to this situation. This is the way propaganda works -racism is a much bigger stick to beat your opponents with than xenophobia. -Say the word "racist" and one immediately conjures up visions of Nazi storm troopers or the KKK. The same thing has occurred with feminist extremism. If the American family is "patriarchal", what then is the family in Iran? And if sex between men and women is inherently sexist, have we not lost the meaning of the word "sexism"?

## COMBATTING THE P. C. PLAGUE

The majority of those standing up to the bullying of the politically correct have been conservatives. This is no surprise, not being from the leftist camp, they have nothing to lose. Free thinking leftists tend to cower in fear, saying what they really think among their friends. No one can blame them, who wants to be insulted or threatened with expulsion from one's social group? One tendency that should be at the forefront of the struggle against the new totalitarianism is anarchism. The average student or worker supports neither the racists nor the PC fanatics, but despises them equally. If anarchists were to promote freedom of speech and opposition to racism and sexism they would create an opening to the average decent person of this new "silent majority".

Thus, in combatting PC, we would also be helping to build the movement. The alternative, that of coat-tailing the PC left as some so-called anarchists have done, would be a monstrous betrayal of principle and a virtual (and justified) guarantee of permanent marginal status.

## P. C. AND SOCIAL CHANGE

PC has a very negative effect upon the struggles for racial equality, women's rights, peace and environmental sanity. The extremism and authoritarianism of the politically correct becomes a brush with which to tar legitimate dissent. Any sort of challenge of the status quo can be, in the tight-wing use of the amalgam tactic, categorized as "political correctness" and therefore unworthy of being listened to. Such a respectable organization as Greenpeace has been slagged in this manner. What next, an attack upon Oxfam and Amnesty International? Movements grow and develop, adapt and change to new situations by free debate and exchange of opinions. If this does not occur ideological sclerosis results and the movement degenerates into a mess of tiny, irrelevant sects. Political correctness, by halting debate, or a least confining it within the narrowest of frameworks, is thus destructive of what should be a natural evolution of critical political and social thought.

## THE RAPE OF LANGUAGE

The destruction of language also takes its toll on social change. We need clear and concise terms, and if robbed of them, we lose something. If it were to turn out that many attitudes deemed racist are actually something else, attacking racism is the wrong prescription. The trivializing of genuine oppression by a host of silly euphemisms is another danger. How are the handicapped helped when people break into laughter at a ridiculous term like "differently abled"?

Terms and concepts initially have clear and distinct meanings. One hundred years ago, everyone knew what was meant by democracy. But rise of totalitarianism and the creation of vast propaganda machines changed all that. Since "democracy" has been applied to brutal and murderous "People's Democracies" as well as "wars for democracy" the term has become almost meaningless. So too, with other valuable words in our vocabulary. (Such as fascism, socialism, communism and liberalism) Propaganda stretches terms far beyond their original meanings.

The word racist for example, in its true meaning, can only be applied to those who believe human beings can be placed in a hierarchy of superiority-inferiority based upon race. Rooted in biology, one's situation is immutable. No matter how wealthy one becomes or how many college degrees you might have, if a member of an "inferior race" you are always second class. To have negative feelings against a group because they are poor or because they have a different culture is not necessarily racism -it could also be classism, cultural chauvinism or xenophobia. For a cultural chauvinist the "inferior" person is deemed worthy of respect when he adopts the dominant culture. For the true racist, the "inferior" are unalterably second class citizens, persons supposedly trapped by their biology.

But the PCers (and now unfortunately seemingly everyone) have confused the issue, amalgamating several different problems into a reductionist

An important debate between the anarcho-syndicalist militant, Pierre Monatte and the anarchist revolutionary, Erico Malatesta took place in 1907. For Malatesta, syndicalism was a threat to anarchism, for Monatte it represented the modern form of the libertarian movement. Two very divergent views, but neither man stooped to character assassination or crude insults. The World War was also a source of much bitterness and divisiveness among libertarians. Yet in 1919, the anti-war syndicalist, Alphonse Merrheim worked along side the former pro-war syndicalist Leon Jouhaux. Kropotkin also supported the Allies, but was soon forgiven by the anarchists. Not only could a person have different ideas, they could even make errors, something the totalitarian mind cannot accept.

Prior to Bolshevism, the labour movement strove for unity -workers came together and formed vast organizations, the most advanced of which were the anarchosyndicalist unions. Here, within the same organization, cohabited anarchists and revolutionary socialists. Sectarianism existed, but the different tendencies seemed to consider themselves part of the same family, for all were taking part in the working class struggle. The general principle that someone with different opinions had to be destroyed by any means had to wait until the Bolshevik Revolution.

## BOLSHEVISM AND THE "CORRECT LINE"

Bolshevism tried to militarize the working class. All members of the organization had to obey a party line handed down from above by the "professional" leadership. Other workers' groups not adhering to Bolshevik opinion were considered enemies. Thus socialists were branded "traitors" or "renegades" because they held views different from Lenin and his pals. This authoritarian poison began to seep into the western workers' movement after the Russian Revolution occurred. With the successful coup of 1917 under their belt, the Bolsheviks created the Communist International and set out to take over or destroy anarcho-syndicalist organizations as the IWW, the CGT, the One Big Union or militant socialist groups such as the Socialist Party of Canada. The amalgam technique was used to undermine support for these groups. All socialists were deemed "Mensheviks", who in turn, were all condemned as right wing (even though many Mensheviks were as revolutionary as the Bolsheviks) The Mensheviks were also unfairly lumped in with the Noske-Ebert ultra right of German Social Democracy (responsible for killing Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht) The anarchist sailors who rebelled at Kronstadt were linked with, and denounced as, "white guard reactionaries".

Stalin refined the Leninist techniques into a brutal art form. With Bolshevism, intolerance and vilification were reserved for party opponents, with the advent of Stalin the persecution turned inward-Any deviation from the party line, no matter how insignificant, was equated with treason. Party members tried to second guess the party line (which changed with Stalin's whims) and often failed to do so quickly enough, ending up, like the Bukharinites and Lovestonites, as "enemies of the Soviet Union. "The amalgam technique got full use. Both anarchists and fascists hate

the USSR. QED, anarchism is fascism. Hence “anarcho-fascism”, “social fascism”, and please let's not forget, “Trotskyite fascism”. The greatest vilification was aimed, not at the bourgeoisie, or even social democracy, but renegade communists, and most especially the poor Trotskyists. To a normal human mind this seems bizarre, given the fact that Trotsky's followers actually supported the Soviet Union. Outside of the Workers Paradise, (excepting Spain) the Stalinists were generally unable to enforce ideological correctness through torture and murder, so more “subtle” methods of intimidation were used. Should some left-wing militant speak out in criticism of the Little Father or even dare to suggest the Moscow Trials weren't entirely cricket, he would immediately be damned as a fascist reactionary, or at least an agent of Anglo-French imperialism. This unlucky person would then be socially ostracized and anywhere the CP had influence, his life would be made difficult. Important figures in the world of arts, politics, labour or academia would find themselves the focal point of all the slanders that the Stalinist propaganda machine could invent. (Consider the fate of George Orwell's masterful exposure of Stalinist treachery, *Homage To Catalonia*.)

Given this behavior, one wonders how the Communist Party was able to find members, but it is necessary to remember the type of person who was attracted to “communism”. Aside from France and Italy, the CP had little support among the working class, tending to attract people from the upper middle classes, the “well meaning” sort concerned about “the poor”, such as clergymen, academics, journalists, artists and social workers. (in America, Leninism has never attracted large numbers of workers, those who are radically inclined tend toward social democracy or populism.) There was also a large contingent of those bohemian types Orwell sneered at as “sandals and fruit-juice socialists”. These people brought all their neurotic baggage with them: disdain for working people, guilt and an insufferable level of self-righteousness. Nowhere were these attitudes more prominent than in the United States. Here the Puritan background of American culture with its attendant Manichaeism played an important part. Political Correctness could only develop from a society which tends to divide all issues into moralistic contests between “Good Guys and Bad Guys”.

One of the earliest instances of PC in its present form is found in Howard Fast's autobiography. The year was 1948 and Fast had written an article in the *Daily Worker* about a picnic in upstate New York. He mentioned that a large group of “Negro boys and girls” were among the young people present. Shortly after the paper appeared on the newsstands, Fast was hustled in front of the party brass and given a thorough dressing-down and threatened with expulsion. Why? In those days “boy” was a common derogatory term for an African American man, and therefore the Stalinists thought it inadmissible to use at any time in reference to a black person. In future, Fast was only to write of “Negro youth”, not boys and girls. With this anecdote we leave the shrinking and festering Communist Party USA and examine the role of the New Left in the development of Political Correctness.

## P. C. AND THE NEW LEFT

The Civil Rights Movement, the fears of nuclear annihilation and the stirrings, of revolt against the “buttoned down” '50's helped give rise to the phenomenon known as the New Left. (I am referring to the North American New Left, not the British or French New Left, movements which developed somewhat earlier) Inspired by Camus, Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Paul Goodman and the Beat Generation, New Leftists, dispensed dogma and constantly questioned their beliefs. They talked of a need for consensus, non-violence and “participatory democracy”. The early New Left was essentially libertarian, but this was not to last, for a contradiction existed within the movement which was to cause its demise.

MacCarthyism, as one might expect, created sympathy for its victims. This sympathy brushed off on the remaining Marxist Leninists. American propaganda was often so ludicrous that it made anti-communism seem square and stupid. New Leftists also felt “beyond” the sectarian disputes of the “Old Left” such as Leninism vs Marxism, anarchism vs. social democracy or Trotskyism vs. Stalinism. The result was a mushy and unprincipled anti-sectarianism which welcomed the Stalinists into the student movement and attacked those who wished to exclude them. Anti-anti-communism became an article of faith for the movement. But the cocoon eggs laid in the student nest soon hatched. It was easy for small ideologically coherent, disciplined groups to intimidate the great mass of non-ideological and anarchic young people. What was once one big happy family became riddled with disputes, often of a very obscure nature.

Many of the original New Leftists dropped out into the hippie scene, handing over the reins to a younger generation increasingly enamoured with violence and romantic delusions about the Third World. For these youngsters, the strengths of the original New Left -its openness and largely non-ideological nature -appeared as weaknesses. Their answer to the totalitarians in their midst was to out-Stalin them. Hence Gandhi, Paul Goodman and the IWW were replaced by Mao, Castro and the vanguard party. Violent posturing and rhetoric became the rage as the would-be leaders of the New Left struggled for “the correct line.”

Some factions fell into total madness. The upper class, guilt-ridden notion of “white skin privilege” allowed Weatherman to declare that it was correct to kill babies providing they were white infants. Racism was redefined as criticism of the Black Panther Party. Charles Manson was even lauded as a hero for a brief period, with Bernadine Dohrn glorifying the brutal murder of such “pigs” as Sharon Tate. Needless to say, the mass of students who were once sympathetic to the New Left fled in all directions at this sort of lunacy. What remained was a rump leftist counter-culture, a plethora of Marxist Leninist sects and a tiny handful of terrorists. About this time the term political correctness was used to describe such fanaticism.